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Metropolitan Antonii of Western and Central Europe will bring the Holy Fire to Bulgaria



For Eastern Orthodox Christians, a major event is the arrival of the “Holy Fire” at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. Bulgaria is among countries to transport the flame from Jerusalem to Sofia, and from there to churches elsewhere in the country.

Plans are for a Bulgarian delegation, travelling on a government aircraft, to do so again at Easter 2020.

Antonii, Metropolitan of Western and Central Europe, said in a television interview on April 4 that he and Religions Directorate head Emil Velinov would travel to Israel for the ceremony.

Usually, a larger delegation of several clerics goes.

Antonii said that because of security measures in Israel against Covid-19, he and Velinov would not leave the aircraft but the flame will be conveyed to them there.

Reportedly, instead of the customary large crowding inside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre for the “Holy Fire” ceremony, only a few clergy will be allowed inside the church and will be required to follow hygiene regulations including keep their distance from each other.

Antonii called on Orthodox Christians to stay at home on Palm Sunday and Easter, saying that clergy would pray for everyone in the churches.

On March 30, Bulgaria’s Deputy Prime Minister Tomislav Donchev, accompanied by Mutafchiyksi, held talks with the Bulgarian Orthodox Church’s governing body, the Holy Synod, which is headed by Patriarch Neofit.

Donchev and Mutafchiyski emerged from the talks to say that the church would hold the major Easter services outside the churches instead of inside, but a subsequent official statement by the Holy Synod did not reflect such an agreement.

There have been repeated calls to close the churches, but Prime Minister Boiko Borissov has said that this is a matter for the church and the government would not intervene.

On April 3, Borissov said that the peak of Covid-19 in Bulgaria was expected to be within two to three weeks. For Eastern Orthodox Christians, Palm Sunday is on April 12 and Easter Sunday on April 19.

As of April 4, there were 498 confirmed cases of new coronavirus in Bulgaria. This total includes 14 people who have died and 34 who have recovered and been discharged from medical establishments after treatment.

A total of 173 patients are in hospital, 20 of them in intensive care. Twenty-three medical personnel have tested positive.

The head of Bulgaria’s crisis staff against Covid-19, Major-General Ventsislav Mutafchiyski, has issued a strong call to the country’s Orthodox Christian majority to not go to church services during Easter 2020, but to celebrate at home.

“We urge all Bulgarian citizens not to treat Palm Sunday and Easter as holidays. It is not time for holidays. Do not register at hotels. Do not go anywhere, do not go to church services, because that’s where you can get infected. In Seoul, 5000 people contracted it at a church service. Stay home,” Mutafchiyski told a briefing on April 4.

“Celebrate the holiday with those you live with and don’t get together with others in your family,” he said.

“(Tourism) Minister Angelkova may be angry with me as well, but everyone in this country is angry with me,” Mutafchiyski said.

He was speaking against a background of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, to which the majority of Bulgarians claim adherence, continuing to keep it houses of worship open, alone among faith groups in Bulgaria in doing so.

— Source: sofiaglobe.com